Interview with Samuel G. Wise Jr.

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

SAMUEL G. WISE, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: August 14, 1995

[Note: This transcript was not edited by Mr. Wise.]

Q: Sam, could you give me a bit about when and where you were born and something about your family?

WISE: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, 1928, May 11th. My father was a civil engineer and worked in the construction of gas holders. He was on a job for a company in Chicago when I was born. That's the reason for the location. Then we moved east where his work took him and I was raised most of my life outside of New York City, in Westchester County, Scarsdale, New York. I graduated from school there.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

WISE: Scarsdale High School.

Q: And then college?

WISE: I went to college at The University of Virginia.

Q: How did that come about?

WISE: Well, my father had gone there. I was undecided, like a lot of people, I guess, when they got out of high school about what to do. So, I joined The Marine Corps for a couple of years.

Q: What did you do in the Marines?

WISE: I went to China with The First Marine Brigade in 1946. We were involved in evacuating General Marshall and what was known as “The Thousand Colonels.” General Marshall's team, who was trying to negotiate a deal between the nationalist Chinese and the communists, but this has fallen down and our job was to evacuate equipment and men from Beijing. So I was there for about eight months.

Q: What was your impression of China?

WISE: Oh, it was one of those wonderful impressions. My first impression was on arriving near Christmastime. We got off the ship at Taifou, which is the port for Beijing and took an interminable time to get there. We arrived in Beijing in the evening and looked like I imagined: the rickshaws, the lights under it, the walls around the different buildings. It just had a mysterious air. It was wonderful. Of course, during the daytime, you saw the seamier side of things. It's an awfully dirty city, but it had its cultural and architectural and other attractions. We were pretty well confined to the Marine Barracks, so I didn't get to see that much.

Q: So, you got out of the Marine Corps in 1948?

WISE: In 1948, right, in spring of '48.

Q: And you went off to University of Virginia?

WISE: Well, yeah, I worked my way over to Europe on a ship with a couple of friends - spent a year, or a summer, rather in Europe. It was the first time I had been over. I ran into all sorts of problems, which eventually ended up getting me into The Foreign Service.

Q: How did that happen?

WISE: Well, I was on a ship - a Norwegian line called the “Nordkin.” We arrived, three friends and I, in Genoa, just at the time that there were disturbances against the Communists in Italy. And their leader...

Q: This was during the election of '48?

WISE: Right, exactly. Taglioni was shot and that caused a great stir. These people I was with were sons of a doctor and they had been over to Europe before. They took some medicaments, not drugs in the sense that we use them today, but penicillin and things like that, which, right after the war, you could sell over there. And so, when we arrived, we got in touch with a gang of people, who turned out to be Mafia types that took us to a hotel and the police took all of our medicaments off of us and so left us there. In the meantime, I'd lost my passport, so I had to go to the Consulate in Genoa. In the process of applying for a new passport and making several visits to the Consul, I got to know the Vice Consul. I asked about his work and, in the course of it, became interested in The Foreign Service. So, when I returned to Virginia and began college in the Fall in Charlottesville, I registered for the Foreign Affairs Program, which they had set up there.

Q: Did you run into any Foreign Service people at the University of Virginia or not?

WISE: I don't know of any really in my era. I know some people like George Vest went there and there are others, but, no, I really never kept in touch with anybody there. I did graduate work after Virginia. I went to the Russian Institute at Columbia and there, too,

were surprisingly few people that I see in the Foreign Service. I know that in different classes, they turn out quite an influx, but not in my particular class.

Q: At the University of Virginia, were you majoring in international affairs...

WISE: Foreign affairs...

Q: And did you concentrate on a country or anything?

WISE: Well, I began to get interested in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. I think I took my first Russian language study there and worked under a Professor Hammond, who, until his death recently, was quite an expert in the area. So I did have some area orientation at that time. At Columbia, I definitely went to the Russian Institute.

Q: You were at Columbia from when to when?

WISE: Fifty-one to fifty-three.

Q: What sort of an impression did you get from Columbia about the Soviet Union? This was a center of study about Soviet affairs. Did it have what you'd call a slant?

WISE: There were individual professors that were regarded one way or the other by students and outsiders as being either soft or “rosy-eyed” about or tough on Communism in the Soviet Union. I didn't have a feeling of the school as a whole, leaning perceptively in one direction or another. It was generally an excellent education. It was one of the two good schools. At that time, Harvard was very good also. But individual professors? I would think they leaned this way or the other.

Q: It was the McCarthy Era.

WISE: We were all pressed one way or another. To skip ahead, when I got to Moscow on assignment some years later in the Foreign Service, one of these professors came over,

who I had the highest regard for. I thought he was a real giant in the field. And certainly in an intellectual, academic sense, I think he was. But I was assigned as his Control Officer and, in the process of taking him around Moscow, it came to me that he was completely naive about everyday life in the Soviet Union. He was just so lost! It was quite a revelation.

Q: How did you get into the Foreign Service?

WISE: After graduating from Columbia, I tried a number of things. I walked the streets of New York, trying to get a job with a newspaper and that didn't happen. But I got a job with a committee with a wonderful name: The Committee for the Liberation from Bolshevism, which turned out to be the organization that was behind Radio Liberation, as it was known then. Then it became Radio Liberty. And I was hired as the assistant to the press director of the press operations. After about a year there, I was called in by him and his superior, a fellow named Howland Sargeant, who was the president, and told that, actually, this organization was funded by the CIA. I became, in the terminology, a “Dave Witty.” I was sworn to secrecy and agreed to do it at the time. And then, of course, as things developed years later, all this came out to the public. So, when I retired from the Foreign Service, I applied to have that time with the Committee calculated as part of my pension. That met resistance at first, but eventually they agreed. Basically, they were taking people off to State, and not telling them who they were really, until later.

Q: What was your impression of how this organization worked. Did it seem dominated by sort of old emigres?

WISE: It was a combination. The leadership was American - Howland Sargeant, and there was an Admiral before him. They were government figures, Americans. They had a number of major officers of the organization. I remember a guy named Doc Dreyer, who was a highly commended Lieutenant Commander in the Navy during the War. He was a big shot. And then there were others, such as Spencer Williams, that I worked for. Then, of course, under them, there were a lot of emigres, because they had the language,

the area skills, the other things that were necessary in operating a radio station that was directed towards the Soviet Union. The head office was in New York. But during the period I was working in New York, I took the Foreign Service Exam, and passed the written with arguably the lowest passing score that you can: a 69.6 or something like that. Anyway, I took it and then, I can't remember exactly when I had the oral exam. That was interesting.

Q: I'm trying to catch the flavor of the times. Do you remember anything about the oral exam?

WISE: One thing that stuck out in particular was the question that they asked about my time in Virginia, at the University of Virginia. They said, “You went to the University of Virginia. You went there for a number of years. What is it that you observed about the state?” They began to ask me questions about products of the state, and how the state was run, which was a good question in terms of what the Foreign Service was looking for down the line. And then they had the usual sorts of things to see whether you can handle yourself with some poise in a possibly embarrassing situation... Not giving you an ashtray if you were smoking... I did not smoke, but there were some things like that.

Q: I was warned about dribble glasses. I don't think they used it, but it was a case where they give you a dribble glass and see what you do with it.

WISE: Then, I remember very clearly that they asked me to leave the room for a few minutes. I think there were two or three State Department, Foreign Service people, and I think a fellow from Commerce, and some other agencies made up the panel. They conferred a little bit, and then they called me back into the room and said, “Congratulations! You passed!” I understand that that's a lot different than it is today.

Q: Yes, it is, but I think they tell you right away. It keeps moving around, how you're doing. Did you go in right away?

WISE: No, I would have, but this was, as we said, the McCarthy period. The Service wasn't putting anybody on. So I passed the exam in '53 and got this other job that I mentioned with the Committee. I had been there not quite two years. In the spring of '55 - it must have been April or May, I get this call from Washington. Somebody says he's in the Foreign Service and that I'm on the list of the people who have passed the exam - how soon can I be down here? I said, “Wait a minute. I haven't talked to anybody. I've got this other job. I need a little time to think.” This person was very insistent that he get a reply very quickly. I learned subsequently that, when the dam broke and they could begin bringing people on again, that they gave a number of new Vice Consuls a list of telephone numbers and said, “Get them down here as quick as you can!” So, I didn't hesitate too long - I decided that's what I didn't want to do. I called back to this guy in town in May or something like that.

Q: So when did you start?

WISE: I think I'd have to look at the record. It must have been May of '55. I can't remember exactly. In those days, it was a two and a half or three week preparation before you went overseas. They didn't have the three month course yet. I think that came shortly thereafter.

Q: Probably. I started on July 5, 1955 and we were Class One.

WISE: You were the first class?

Q: Yeah. It was almost three months with language. You probably came just behind. What was you group like?

WISE: Well, you didn't have a terrific sense of group because it was a short period of time. The main things I remember are that we, almost without exception, were being assigned to visa duty. They had a special visa program at the time... The Refugee Relief Program. You were either going to Italy, as I ended up doing, or to Germany or some other place in Europe. They had an urgent need for Vice Consul “fodder” to get over and process these

visas. There was always some competition or hope that you would get into one program, say to Germany, where you could take a ship over there. Or if you got sent to Italy, you had to fly. So, I had friends that fell in both camps. But I do remember some people from that era. I don't think it's the same...

Q: It's not the same bonding that takes place...

WISE: No, I don't think so.

Q: Your first posting was where?

WISE: Palermo.

Q: You were there from when to when?

WISE: Summer - it must have been about July '55 until summer or fall of the next year. About one year. The Department had made a promise, which they pretty much held to, to all the young officers that were sent out to these visa mills. After a year, recognizing this was an unusual assignment, you would be assigned to a post in a regular Foreign Service position in Europe. And so, after a year, all my friends were assigned to Bern or Rome or Zurich or wherever. When my turn came up, I was assigned to New Caledonia, which at that time, you may remember, was considered in the European Bureau, although it's out South of France. My Consulate General, a guy named Jim Keeley, he thought that was good stuff. He thought the fact that I wouldn't put up any resistance or anything (I didn't know any better, to do it or not) was good.

Q: Tell me a little, before we leave and go to New Caledonia, what were you doing in the Refugee Relief Program in Palermo?

WISE: It was set up in a way that there were different sections. As I say, a real visa mill. They issued a lot of visas under this program. There was an issuance section: two or three officers that did nothing but issue the visas on the final day. And there was a

correspondence section that responded to constituents of Congress and people that wrote about different applicants. There was what was called the “DSR-11 Section.” The DSR-11 was affidavit support to show that the person coming to the United States would be supported all right. Well, in this year, or the little over a year that I was there, in various sections, but I never actually issued a visa. I never got into the issuing section. But I did all kinds of other parts of the visa operation. Actually, I found the whole experience very interesting.

Q: To some extent, I was a Refugee Relief Officer up in Frankfurt at pretty much the same time. Particularly down in Italy, this was essentially a fraudulent program. I mean, they weren't refugees. They were Italians living in Italy who hadn't been thrown out of another country and were there. I understand the background of this was that the program was designed almost from the beginning to help the Italians. To have a special program, they came up with the Refugee Relief Program, which... Up in Germany, we were dealing with real refugees. But down in Italy and also in the Netherlands, there were these people within their same country, but they were considered refugees. Did this dealing with a program which, on the face of it, didn't make sense, get to the young officers?

WISE: I don't know about the others. I guess I was aware that this was sort of a misnomer. They had tacked this name on some legislation and it was, as you say, designed to let a lot of Italians come into the United States. Refugees from what, I don't know. I don't even remember what the definition was. But they had the different categories, as you remember, different priorities. I think fourth priority was brother and sister or something like that. There were an awful lot of them that were trying to get visas. But I might just tell you one experience. I don't know if in Germany you had this sort of thing. It was quite a discerning experience for someone who was new in the Foreign Service. I had been in about three weeks before they flew me over to Palermo, brand spanking new. I think I'd been there two days when I got a call from the Consulate General's Office, which was located in a different building, saying that there was this gentleman coming over to inquire about his brother's visa application: He was an American citizen, who had a letter from

a Congressman, and could I please give this attention? I said, “Of course, I'll be ready.” And he came over to talk to me and mentioned that he was trying to get his brother to the States and he laid $10,000 on the table. Clearly, if I'd accepted his $10,000 and gotten his visa, he would have had a deal! That was the first temptation... But, as I said, I really enjoyed doing the consulate work there. We had a great group of Vice Consuls. You talk about did I have some bonding with my entering class. No, but with this group in Palermo, we've kept together...

Q: Who were some of them?

WISE: There was a fellow named Freeman Matthews, Sam Gammon, Don Junior, Bill Harris. There are others that are still around. The experience in Sicily and in Palermo in those days was something that stayed with you. A loftier atmosphere was certainly there. Just after we arrived, we didn't have our household effects...

Q: Were you married?

WISE: Just married. We just had furniture and a few things together when this assignment came up. When we arrived, we did rent a place out in a suburb, near the beach, in a very nice area called Mondello. We rented a little house in an orchard, in a citrus grove. It had a dirt road leading up to it. The wonderful day arrived, finally, when our furniture came. We were waiting in the house, looking down the dirt road and here comes this ox cart, pulled not by ox, but a donkey. It finally gets to the house and backs this thing up and the workmen take off the side of this wooden van, and it's empty, totally empty. We were devastated, to be sure. We had lost just about everything we owned. We made the usual reports, the Consulate did, and the police told us, “Well, it's gone. Sicilians are very clever. It's probably up in Milan now.” Anyway, this went on for a few weeks and, all of a sudden, our Administrative Officer called me and he said, “Sam, I have one more report for you to sign here.” What had happened was, they had recovered the things. They took me into a room, a storehouse room. I saw these things around and half of them I didn't recognize,

even though they were my own. All these Italian police were standing around, waiting for this great emotional outburst from me. I guess I disappointed them a little bit. We did get practically everything back. The guy who was guarding them took them up to Partenito, which is a Mafia hangout, and put them in his own home and, somehow, they'd gotten word of it. They caught this fellow and his wife claimed that the picture of my wife and me in our wedding... Well, they were relatives of theirs.

Q: Then you went off to New Caledonia. Before you went to New Caledonia, outside of the fact that you were an ex-Marine, so some of these names rang bells for anybody who followed World War II. But did you know anything about New Caledonia at all?

WISE: Not a great deal, no. I was in China, just sort of passing through the Pacific on the way there. I did spend some time in the Marine Corps in [] as well. But just the general, superficial, historical knowledge of its importance during the War.

Q: Can you describe where New Caledonia is?

WISE: Well, as I recall without looking at the map again, it's about 1,500 miles to the east of Brisbane, Australia. It's not in the middle of the Pacific, but it's probably the first major island as you're going from Australia to the United States. Then you run into Fiji and Pago Pago and Tahiti. It was quite a ways. It was funny how our ship arrived. We took a ship from Ticino to Sydney, Australia and then had to take another ship out to New Caledonia. So, it was about six weeks before we got there. They were so happy to get somebody...

Q: What was the situation? First, what were the dates you were in New Caledonia?

WISE: Well, it was the summer of '56 til, I guess, the fall of '57.

Q: What was the situation when you were there?

WISE: It's a French colony, a territory. It was run by a Governor General. It's population was primarily Melanesians and was being threatened to some extent in population

terms by an influx of Indo-Chinese that had come down there, particularly after the war. The main industry was nickel. At that time, Cuba was leading nickel producer and New Caledonia was second, so the economy depended a great deal on the nickel market. It was run as a French colony. I had the feeling that, down the road, there were going to be problems with the native population and the colonial status. But at that time, it was a very subtle situation. I guess the reason we maintained a Consulate their, the United States, was because it was the only one in the whole South Pacific at that time. It was important as an economic entity and also, it was the headquarters of the South Pacific Commission, which was the Commission that fought off all the major countries in the area, and tried to cooperate in economic and commercial ways.

Q: Did the area of the Consulate General extend to other Pacific islands?

WISE: It did. Incidentally, the Consulate had a perfect symmetry: two Vice Consuls, two American secretaries (one I think to keep company for the other) and two local employees.

Q: And a Consul?

WISE: No, that was it. There was a Consul previously, but the Department had trouble getting people out there. So I was Vice Consul during the period that I was there.

Q: Who was the other Vice Consul?

WISE: Jack White first, and then another fellow named Bob Shackleton. I don't know whether they're still in the Service or not. The work in the Consulate extended throughout the South Pacific, which made it such a wonderful job in a way. Basically, one Vice Consul was traveling almost all the time - one or the other. I was the Junior Vice Consul, but I did Consular work in Fiji. We used the old Pan Am office as our base. And Tahiti - we used to have a Consulate in Tahiti. It went way back to 1789 or something like that. One of the jobs I had, an unpleasant job, was to put the Consulate building up for sale. I dutifully did so, but almost suffered as a consequence. The place where I was staying was this

hotel where this group of what they call “bourees,” these thatched huts that they had done up rather well. And one night, mine caught on fire. I got out alright, but I heard all the people saying, “This is the wrath of Queen [Pumare] against the Americans for selling the Consulate, which was given to the Americans.” And we were trying to sell it. Well, I got out all right, but I was there about two weeks. They had flying boat connections... They didn't have an airport in those days. You flew around in these big flying boats. So, I went there, and to the Samoas, so it was a wonderful introduction to that area at an age where you can appreciate it.

Q: What was the work?

WISE: It was basically consular work. One of the cases I had in Tahiti was where an American doctor had come over and gotten himself into a terrible accident. Communications were such that he need a lot of help and I tried to do it. It was a mixed Consular pack of things. Some protection, some deaths...

Q: Did you have protection welfare cases of American beach combers or were they around?

WISE: Yes, but not in any great numbers. There was a whole set of film makers out there. I remember, in particular, one American outfit - they were willing to help with French and this and that. So, you got involved in what was going on.

Q: How did you find the French government of New Caledonia? Had De Gaulle taken over by this time?

WISE: Yes.

Q: I was wondering whether they were putting the freeze on the Americans.

WISE: The French were always a little distant, I think, towards the Americans in those days in New Caledonia and in Tahiti. Distant but proper - they didn't go out of their way

to make anything difficult. The local people were all very warm, very friendly toward Americans. The place was just sort of given to good things in life. They did a lot of dancing and that sort of thing. It was sort of a crazy place. You couldn't get your orientation easily. There were all sorts of rumors about what was happening and what was going on.

Q: I take it there was not much interest from the Department of State and what you all were doing.

WISE: Not really. I mean, FBO asked me to go out there and put the property up for sale, but other than that, you dutifully, diligently file your dispatch report. Maybe somebody read it, maybe somebody didn't. It's like now: when there's trouble in an area, they're interested.

Q: You left there in 1957. What happened?

WISE: My two years were completed and the Department kept its word in terms of the second assignment, the general Consular work, because there was some reporting and that sort of thing. From there I was sent to language training and area studies in Oberammergau, Germany. I had pointed out to some inspectors that had come to Palermo that my real hope was to be assigned to the Soviet Union. I'd gone through Colombia and I had this degree. They said, “Mr. Wise, that's very good training, but you'll never get to Moscow unless you get there at the Department's expense. He said to apply for this Oberammergau thing, so I did. I took a test in the language, and I didn't do very well at all. But, as I recall, I got assigned to Oberammergau while I was in New Caledonia, then came back to the Department en route to Oberammergau and took the language test, and did terrible at it. I thought they weren't going to send me, but the system had committed to it and so I was sent. I found that, with some effort on my part, I got up to speed with the others pretty quickly. The program is organized by the Army for its officers to learn Russian and the Soviet area. It was two years in the United States: one at Monterey, one at either Harvard or Colombia, and then two years at Oberammergau. It's called the “FAST Program.” The State Department people just went to Oberammergau for one year

and then on to our assignment. I did my year there and then was assigned back to the Department, to INR.

Q: At Oberammergau, were they pushing the Army side, or were they really preparing you for the Soviet Union? How did you feel about that?

WISE: I thought it was a pretty well-rounded program. They had the military side, but there were some optional courses, so you didn't have to take all the military courses if that wasn't your focus. They had history - some of the things were repetition of what I had learned earlier, but they were all done quite well. They were taught almost exclusively by people from the former Soviet Union and a lot of the teaching was done in Russian, so you really had to dig in. I thought it was a pretty well-rounded program. After the time came at Oberammergau for my next assignment, I, of course, wanted to go to Moscow. But, as somebody in the Soviet Office told me several years later, “Well, in those days, we couldn't assign you to Moscow if you hadn't been to Moscow.” So, I didn't get assigned. I was disappointed, but I did get assigned right after Oberammergau, to Moscow for three months as a Protocol and Escort Officer. Three of us were assigned to the U.S. National Exhibition in 1959. This, you may remember, was the Exhibition's first big American presence in the Soviet Union. This is where the Kitchen Debate took place between Khrushchev and Nixon. My very clear recollection of that is when Nixon came out of the room as the loser in the Kitchen Debate, but a winner as far as how he got it portrayed back here in this country. That was a very intense, interesting, out of job experience for a Foreign Service Officer.

Q: What was the exhibit about and what were you doing?

WISE: We had all kinds of activities, trying to demonstrate how we did things in the United States. One exhibit was of machines that made certain cups. There was one done by a USIA guy that explained how we did things in a social, economic, political way. There were Sears and Roebuck catalogues, demonstrations of goods. The Soviets didn't have

much of those, so it was a tremendous success. But I'm sure the Soviet leadership was very nervous about this whole thing, but they agreed, in a period of detente, to do it. I remember the lines of visitors: if they saw a line, they'd get in it. I remember asking someone at the end of it, “What are you standing in line for?” He said, “I don't know - there must be something good up there!”

Q: Where was the exhibit taking place?

WISE: It was taking place in a place called [Sakomakay Park], a little bit on the outskirts of Moscow. I was staying in the Ukraine Hotel and then going back out. I remember I went up from Oberammergau in the summer for this thing. The three months were beginning in August, I think. My job as a Protocol and Escort Officer was, technically, at the beginning, meeting American VIPs who came out to see this thing. So, we were shuffling back and forth to the airport. Another fellow named Walter Bedell-Smith, who's since passed away, was another one of the Officers. But, eventually, we got involved in the management and running of the exhibit, which was an unforeseen development, which I thoroughly enjoyed. We worked with different parts of it. We kept up with things: crowd control, all sorts of things. The overall manager just called on us to do it, and so we did it. We enjoyed it.

Q: What was your impression of the Soviet Union? You'd been studying it at various places and, now, here you were seeing it.

WISE: It's always hard to describe the place. It has a tremendous fascination. I was glad to at last be there, to use the language. I was struck how run down most of it looked. There were signs all over: “In Repair” on practically all the buildings. Except for the Kremlin and a few showcase places that were kept up, the place looked like a very run down city. The people generally seemed very approachable and seemed to like Americans. The officials, on the other hand, I thought were very officious and difficult to deal with. However they felt personally, they approached us in a very official manner. You couldn't get near any of them. You couldn't get near even the people on a casual basis. Say, if you ran into

somebody and got to chatting and, afterwards, said, “Why don't we go out and have dinner or something together,” they would generally refuse because they knew they were being observed by the Secret Police and that they would be questioned afterwards about their contact with me or any American. They generally didn't want the hassle.

Q: You came back to INR in 1969...

WISE: No, this would be in the late fifties. I came back to INR in 1959.

Q: And you were there from when to when?

WISE: 1959-1961, at which time I was assigned to Moscow.

Q: What were you doing in INR?

WISE: We had a small unit called “Research on the Soviet Union.” The initials were RSB, as I recall. There were five of us. We followed Soviet foreign policy initiatives and actions. One of us would follow the Soviet Union in India or the Soviet Union in China, the Far East, the Soviet Union in South America... There was that kind of division in the office.

Q: What was your particular bailiwick?

WISE: I had the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. I watched the relations of the center of the Communist world with its satellite.

Q: What was you impression of how the Soviet Union stood with these countries, with the Eastern European countries?

WISE: It's clear that it was a relationship of master to slave or master to servant, that these other countries were just meant to service the Soviet Union, the Motherland, and to provide a buffer with the Western world. We generally felt that there was a great

unwillingness on the part of the population. But they had the effective puppet leaders in all of these countries, who couldn't do much more than the bidding in Moscow.

Q: Prior to your coming to that job, there had been the Hungarian revolt of the fall of '56. And there had been the East German ones in '53 or '54 in Berlin, and then there had been something in Poland, too. There was obviously unrest, but did we see this as a potential for a problem, or that the Soviets had it pretty much in hand.

WISE: I think we felt that they had it in control. In more optimistic moments, we let our hearts run away with out minds and think that this was the basis for some real change. But, realistically, the cards were all in Moscow's hands. At that time, things were very controlled.

Q: How was INR used, as far as you were concerned? Did you feel that it was being used by the Soviet Desk, or that you operated in a vacuum?

WISE: Probably more the latter. I would have to say that that assignment was probably the least satisfactory for me in the Foreign Service. I had a strong feeling about what I felt was the futility of the work because I didn't think it was being used to any appreciable degree. The main salient product that we produced was an early morning briefing memorandum for the Director of INR, who took it to the Secretary. Basically, we were getting stuff in from different parts of the world, which I didn't find very different from what was in the newspaper.

Q: Did you get any feel for the CIA and what it was doing?

WISE: Not at that time. I knew that they were doing things, too, but most of my contacts then and since then have led me to the view that in most cases, their information is fairly routine and humdrum, too. There are obviously some things that they've gotten a jump on. But an awful lot of things that are treated very high and classified as sensitive, I don't find that way at all.

Q: You finally got off to Moscow in '61?

WISE: I went there in March.

Q: You were in Moscow from when to when?

WISE: Sixty-one to sixty-four. Still the period of Khrushchev, but still a very tempestuous period since they were Missile Crisis years, the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was also the time of the big flurry over a Soviet spy named Oleg Penkovsky, who was apprehended by the Soviet authorities and executed for dealing with the Americans. From what I've read about it, he apparently was a fairly important source for us. The whole Embassy was caught up in this thing when it happened.

Q: Tell me, what was your job when you went out there?

WISE: I was in the Consular Section.

Q: How big was the Consular Section at that time?

WISE: Three Officers and one secretary and I think three locals.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

WISE: Again, there was somewhat of a variety. Mainly, visa work - not immigrant visas primarily. It was visitors to the United States. If you look at it on a volume basis, it wasn't very big, but all the cases were fairly complicated in those days, so you spent a lot of time on them. And there were some immigrant visa cases. There were death cases, some defector cases, including the man who shot Kennedy. He came out there before I was at the Embassy. He, as I was told and have read since, went to Dick Sneider, who was head of the Consular Section, and said that he wanted to give up his citizenship and live in the Soviet Union. Sneider talked to him and asked him to come back. For some time, they went back and forth. They were trying to stall him, because they'd had previous cases like

this. A number of them in which people came over and said they wanted to give up their citizenship and the Consul had said “Alright” and taken the oath to give it up. And then the person had found themselves in limbo, because they couldn't get Soviet citizenship. And, very often, they were disturbed, cooky sort of people that the Soviets didn't want, so the U.S. ended up taking them back. When Oswald walked in, they'd had a bunch of these cases, so they stalled him off. And he eventually left Moscow, without giving up his citizenship and went down to Belarus, where he married his wife and had a child. By the time I arrived on the scene, he came back to Moscow, having decided that he wanted to go back to the United States. He came into the Consulate and to Sneider, who I think was still there, and we conferred with Washington, and he eventually got his passport. He also asked for a repatriation loan; he didn't have any money. So I processed that, but all this was sort of routing. Eventually, he went back to the United States. I was in Trieste when Kennedy was assassinated and, when I heard the name, I just about fell over. I remember him as a very arrogant person; arrogant in the sense of demanding his rights. I mean, here's a person who wanted to give up his citizenship, but he was certainly not humble or on his knees when he came in to get his passport. He was demanding that we do this and that.

Q: What was the spirit of the Embassy at the time? It was a difficult time. Let's talk about before the Cuban Missile Crisis. Who was the Ambassador?

WISE: The first Ambassador was Llewellyn Thompson.

Q: Did you have any impression about how he operated?

WISE: He had a very, very high reputation. He was one of our Senior Ambassadors at the time. Very gentlemanly, very polite, clearly very bright, not terribly close to the staff, at least at the junior level. I had the impression not up the line. He had a much more sprightly wife, who was more friendly. But everyone considered him a good, solid professional, who was in charge of the Embassy. I had one occasion where I had a strong difference with

him. I had an incident I was involved in: as a Consular Officer, we would get these calls from people who thought they had a claim to American citizenship or otherwise wanted to come in and visit the Consular Section. That wasn't easy in those days, because they had Soviet guards ringed around the Embassy and, to get into the Embassy, they had to run the gauntlet of these guards. One of the ways that we could get people in was that somebody would call and we'd say, “Okay, we'll meet you outside at such and such a time.” And we'd go outside, the Vice Consuls, and go past the guards. The person would come up (they'd tell us what they'd be wearing, so we could recognize them) and we'd shake hands and then turn around and take them into the Embassy. And this worked for quite a while. But then, evidently, the orders got changed one day, and I was out there to meet someone. When we came back up into the Embassy, the guards - two or three big, beefy guys - just stopped in front of us and said, “He can't go in.” I said, “Why not” and we had a big argument there. It ended up that there were some fists flying and they eventually dragged him off and I went back in the Embassy. I was just furious and, of course, reported it to the DCM and the Ambassador learned about it. We recommended that some sort of comparable treatment be done to the Soviets, in Washington or somewhere. But this was not the view of the Embassy. They felt that there were other irons in the fire and that we shouldn't react to a situation like that, except in a very mild way. I think maybe there was some sort of a protest to the Consular Section, to the Foreign Ministry. Anyway, as a young Officer, I was a little upset.

Q: He was replaced by Foy Kohler. What was he like? Did you get a feel for him at all?

WISE: Yes. He was certainly more outgoing. And he established early on a policy in making his initial calls to Soviet officials of taking an Embassy Officer with him. And this extended all the way down to the Junior Officers. It would be the job of the Officer accompanying to take the notes and draft a cable afterwards to Washington about what occurred at the meeting. It was a chance to meet the Ambassador, riding in the car over

there and back, and engaging in a little personal talk, as well as professional. He seemed much more approachable in that sense.

Q: Obviously, at an Embassy such as Moscow at that time, although you were in different sections, all the Officers are pretty much sewn together, aren't they?

WISE: Very much.

Q: Did you find that you were having problems with security, being bugged or enticed or anything like that? Was this a problem?

WISE: The assumption was that everything was bugged, including the Embassy, except for one or two floors up at the top - the floor where the Ambassador and the DCM and some others were. It was assumed that everything else was open to eavesdroppers. Of course, we found out subsequently that even the areas we thought were secure were not always secure. But this was true the apartments as well. The very sophisticated (for those days, '61 - '64) equipment could penetrate through the windows of your apartment and pick up conversation. So the only time we really felt safe in talking was when you were out on the street. Very often, you'd save your most sensitive conversations for that sort of venue.

Q: How did the Officers feel about Khrushchev at that time? Was there a sort of an Embassy that you were getting, particularly from those in the Political Section?

WISE: I don't know this is an assessment of the Political Section of the Embassy or not. I think that Khrushchev was considered a colorful character - certainly an improvement over Stalin, and the revelations that he had permitted to come out about Stalin and the Stalin Era made him certainly a step ahead of Stalin. But he was a convinced Communist, still running the place in a way of a convinced Communist. He was also considered, being colorful, somewhat unpredictable. I think that caused people a lot of concern.

Q: How did the Missile Crisis play out? How did it hit you all?

WISE: It didn't hit me directly in the Consular Section, except that my wife and another wife of an Embassy Officer were traveling in the Caucuses when this thing broke out. They were mysteriously hustled back to Moscow, without being told what happened. They said that something was happening and certainly scared them a little bit. My main memory of the Missile Crisis was in dealing with some of the Officers in the Political Section. A Political Counselor, a fellow named Richard Davies, he and I were fairly close. As you said before, it was a close Embassy. We were all sort of hemmed in so, socially, we knew each other quite well. I remember, being in his office quite a few times, that he had delivered one or two messages to his counterpart in the Foreign Ministry during the course of the Crisis. A couple times, I remember, big sighs of relief because such and such a message had been received in such and such a way. There was, overall, a tremendous tenseness at the time. Certainly, we all had the realization that, if there were a nuclear exchange, we'd be wiped out by our own people. But there's not much you can do about it.

Q: Would you go out to the market and wander around and get any feeling for what was happening at the time? Was this part of the work of all types of Officers, to go out and almost take the temperature of the crowd?

WISE: Yes, that was very much the case. I recall doing it less in Moscow. I guess my wife did most of the shopping in Moscow. But even she said that when she'd go to a market, she'd be followed. They followed all the Americans. I did most of that sort of thing when we'd take trips. The Embassy had a policy then, which I think was a excellent policy, of whenever an Officer could be spared for a period of time, to take a trip to some part of the Soviet Union. We'd always travel at least in pairs; they didn't want anybody going alone. We'd go to Central Asia, (Samarkand, Tashkent, and Bokhara). There was a visitor from the Department who was along at that time, too. We would go out to the markets and talk to people and get a feeling for the place. We'd go to the bookstores and do all sorts of

things that would expose us to how the place ran. We would concentrate less on meeting officials. It was more of an orientation to the society. It was very useful, I think.

Q: By the time you left there, what was your impression of the Soviet Union?

WISE: I thought it was, as I said earlier, a run down place. The contrast between the general state of the place as you saw it and its might in the military fields, its nuclear abilities, didn't seem to jive somehow - except by draining all of its economic resources in one direction, they could produce this military thing. Naively, I thought that this could go on perhaps indefinitely. My feeling was, “I can't see how they'd done it now, but if they've done it, I guess it can go on indefinitely.”

Q: Were we looking at the nationality problem in the Soviet Union, as far as being a potential device...

WISE: It was certainly being looked at in an academic way. But I don't think that people made any plans that the country was going to break up because of the nationality problem. And that's exactly what happened. It didn't break up because of the nationality problem so much as because of the economic problems. And then the nationality realities came out. But I certainly didn't get a great sense of nationality unrest in traveling around the country. People were afraid to talk to us. They just don't come up and say what they really think. If they thought they were being oppressed, they didn't do it because they knew we were being followed and that anybody who came in contact with us was going to be questioned. I remember one particular case, that I must say was a contrast. It was a very touching moment. I was traveling with, I think, Bill Watts, down to Rostov on the Don. We arrived overnight and we went in the hotel and started talking, two or three Officers from the Embassy. This cleaning woman came into the room and said, “I want to clean.” We said, “Well, go away.” We were trying to prepare ourselves for some meetings with some officials. She insisted; she came back. She pointed up to the ceiling; she was telling us that we were being listened to. Well, we assumed we were, too. But, for a Soviet citizen

in those days to stick their neck out, to tell foreigners (the so-called “enemy”) that they were being listened to was a rather touching little thing. So, you did see very occasional glimpses of decency.

Q: How did you wife respond to life in the Soviet Union?

WISE: I think she found it a very fascinating experience, difficult in terms of shopping, trying to raise a family and keep things going. We had a son born not in the Soviet Union, but while we were stationed there. She went to Helsinki to have our son. So, after his arrival, we had three children there. Two of the children, the girls, went to a Russian kindergarten. They would come home and sing the praises of Lenin, all the little songs the children had to learn. We took it with more amusement than anger, but they did learn some Russian. We liked that. They had a cultural life, of course, in Moscow and other major cities that, as foreign diplomats, we had almost unique access to, so we could go to the Bolshoi, or the opera or the ballet, even things like their famous circus, museums. So, that was a good part of the experience. You felt under a tremendous pressure, which you got used to after a while. You didn't feel it in your day-to-day operation. You were careful about your conversations. You knew you were being followed. But it became part of the routine. The only time that you really realized how heavy it was was when you left the Soviet Union. We occasionally would go to Helsinki, to Finland, to accompany a diplomatic pouch, or for a shopping trip or something like that.

Q: Today is the 22nd of August, 1995. Sam, you were in Trieste from when to when?

WISE: Trieste from the summer of 1964 until the summer of 1967.

Q: What was the situation in Trieste at that time?

WISE: At that time, it was still a standoff situation between Italy and Yugoslavia over the border: the so-called “zones A and B,” which represented a temporary solution of border claims after World War II. One of the purposes of the work of the Consulate was to watch

the situation because it was considered a potential hotspot, where hostilities could break out if conditions were right. So, this was one of our jobs: to watch the activities of the Slovenians who came into Trieste. Many Slovenian families actually lived there, but there was a lot of across-the-border activity as well.

Q: How big was the Consulate?

WISE: We had about five Officers, three secretaries, and about seven or eight local employees.

Q: That was quite a good size, wasn't it?

WISE: It was and, as I say, I think it represented the United States' concern that this could be a potential hotspot.

Q: What was your position in the Consulate?

WISE: I was Deputy Principal Officer.

Q: Who was the head of it then?

WISE: I'll have to tell you as it comes to me.

Q: How did you keep an eye on the situation?

WISE: We were in touch with all the political leaders of the area. In addition, tried to get out among the population at large, to find out if there were resentments or concerns building up that might have led in a dangerous direction. We would occasionally go over into Yugoslavia, just to see the situation over there. I guess the nearest Consulate on that side was in Belgrade in those days.

Q: No, Zagreb.

WISE: Excuse me. Of course, Zagreb. There was nothing in Ljubljana. I think there might have been a USIA post: a library or something like that. It was a fairly stable situation. The press would try to fire up some things. On the Italian side, the Messini, the so-called "MSI," the ex-fascist types. And then there were some on the Slovenian side: newspapers that would try to heat up the scene. But, in general, the situation during my time there was fairly quiet. I did have one or two experiences that might be useful to mention. When I first arrived from Moscow (I arrived in the summertime), as is the custom, people were taking leave and transfers. I found myself, I think maybe from the first day or shortly thereafter, as Acting Principal Officer. About the first thing that happened, a month after my arrival, we had this tremendous disaster in our Consular District: a dam disaster, where a couple of thousand people were wiped away in a couple of seconds, or a couple of minutes at most, including a few American citizens, so I got involved in that and had to up and deal with the situation, and keep in touch with the Embassy in Rome. Of course, they were very interested in it. It was quite an experience just to be arriving at post.

Q: I ask as a former Consulate General down in Naples during a very bad earthquake in 1980, there were a lot of complaints about how the Italian government responded to their tragedy. How did you find the Italians dealt with this tragedy?

WISE: On balance, I think not too badly. Emergencies, tragic situations like this, always catch people by surprise and there's a certain amount of confusion. I thought they regrouped and began to deal with the situation before too long fairly well. There were, in the newspapers later, recriminations about whether it was done right or could have been done later, as there always are. But I didn't think it was done too badly.

Q: As you were looking at the scene within the Trieste area, did you find any indigenous desire on the part of the people to go back and become part of Yugoslavia in those days?

WISE: Not at all. I had the feeling Trieste was, in those days, like an old [dowager]: the port emporium of the Hungarian Empire, you remember, in those years. It had fallen on

hard times. Its major economic activity was its shipbuilding industry in Trieste proper and [Monfalcone]. Times were hard. One of the big concerns that the people had there was that all the young people were leaving, going to Milan or other areas where economic prospects were better. The older people were always claiming that the economic situation was terrible, that they didn't have enough money, but they always went around very well-dressed and ate in the best restaurants. That was something of a permanence that continued with the place.

Q: I assume you were reporting on the economy of the place.

WISE: Yes, of course.

Q: Was there any effort on the part of the United States to sort of "buck up" the economy by giving them military contracts or anything like that?

WISE: Not really. I think we would have know if there were special contracts or things. In those days, the concern for assistance to Italy was more in the Mezzogiorno, in the South, than it was in the North. The expectation on Washington's part was that this was something that the Italians themselves should look out for more. And the Italians would get some business occasionally and, if they landed a big contract, it would be big news for a while. But, overall, the area was not booming economically. But, as I say, people certainly were getting along alright.

Q: During all of this period, I was in Belgrade, running the Consular Section. We were almost inundated by East Europeans, coming to Yugoslavia to seek asylum. They'd come to the Embassy and we'd say, "We can't do a thing for you, but if you get to Italy, they'll be happy to take care of you." How about the refugee situation at that point?

WISE: We had some that came through. We had another person that was doing the Consular work, Jack Gillespie, doing the immigrant visa work, and he was fairly busy. It wasn't a flood though. We just had the one man doing it. So, obviously, the Yugoslavs

must have prevented a lot of people from coming across the border. And we'd hear of some harrowing escapes sometimes.

Q: Did you find that the Yugoslavs opened and shut the border from time to time? Were there problems on either side of the border - gas was cheaper on one side than the other and that sort of thing? Were there border problems?

WISE: Yes, mainly for the Italians going back and forth. They would go for cheaper gas. In those days, you went over to Yugoslavia for three things: gas, meat and women. But for purchases, it was a lot cheaper, and the Italians would zip over the border and there would be long lines at the border. But we did get a number of Yugoslavs that would come over, Slovenians primarily. Around the Trieste railroad station, there used to be this huge market of stuffed, life-sized dolls. For some reason, the Yugoslavs loved these things. They would buy these things and take them back to Yugoslavia.

Q: You were mentioning one of the things that you had to do was close the Consulate in Venice?

WISE: Yes, that also came very close after my arrival from Moscow. Orders came from the Department to close the Consulate, which had been in operation for a very long time. I had to close one in Tahiti, so I began to feel fated at this point. When I went down and investigated the situation, I had to acknowledge that the Consulate was there for sentimental reasons more than anything else. It was being treated by Americans as an adjunct of American Express. They would go for lost passports and this and that. And we were only two hours away, so it was reasonable. Still, it's sort of painful to have to go to the city authorities and tell them that you're leaving and they get down practically on their knees and plead for the United States to stay. And we also had a lovely Consulate building, given to us by Barbara Hutton, on the Grand Canal. So that was another interesting but painful experience. One of my more interesting personal ventures when I was in Trieste was a case where we received a telegram from an American union

in the United States, informing us that there was an American ship in port that did not comply with the crew requirement. Namely, the crew was primarily Indian and the officers, except for one American captain, were all Greek. The union urged us to stop this ship from proceeding, which we did. There was some consultation with the Department, but they basically left it in our hands. We had quite a standoff for several months, where the ship tried to escape the port. I'd call up the patrol people and they'd catch him. The owner came over from the United States twice to try to persuade us to see things his way. Eventually, the owner - and it must have been painful for him, financially - changed the flag of the ship to a Panamanian flag. It was useful to have an American flag on that ship because there was useful trade to war areas on American carriers, where American supplies were going to certain areas.

Q: Did the Italian authorities give you full support on that?

WISE: They were very cooperative. We all had a wonderful time! The guy was clearly wrong: he just did not have the requisite number of American citizens on board.

Q: Were the Italians concerned that the Yugoslavs might make a grab for them? Was there any siege mentality, or had it pretty well dissipated by the time you were there?

WISE: I don't recall any siege mentality. There was a certain amount of grumbling on both sides, and effort by the extremists on both sides to stir up things, but I don't remember any crisis feeling. I think there was a general feeling that the situation would stay as it was for many years, and it has. The zone A and B problem was eventually solved. By the time I got to Rome, later in my career, there was agreement. So often, you don't see these things coming down the road. You get so used to the status quo that you can't think of anything that would change it.

Q: When Venice was closed down, did you take part of the Venetian work?

WISE: Yes, we took over the Consular District.

Q: Did this include the Brenner Pass, the German area?

WISE: Yes, it went up to the Brenner Pass and then down below Venice.

Q: Did you have any dealing with the German or Austrian minority in Italy?

WISE: We watched it from the newspapers primarily. We occasionally made it up there and there were the occasional incidents over the years. But I don't recall any major incident. Our attention was focused on the Italian-Slovenian border.

Q: How did the Italians treat the Slovenians who lived in the Trieste area? Schools, housing?

WISE: Not too badly. There were complaints. You wondered how many times these complaints were fostered by outside forces trying to stir up some trouble. But they lived in certain areas and they weren't as wealthy as the Italians. But, on the other hand, there were some that had succeeded quite well in Trieste, in Italian society. There may have been some discrimination, but I don't think it was as bad as it was portrayed sometimes by the Slovenians.

Q: You left there in '67. Where did you go?

WISE: From Trieste, I came to Washington and spent some time in the State Department, from 1967 to 1970.

Q: Doing what?

WISE: I spent one year in the European Bureau front office as a Staff Assistant. And a year in the operations center as a Senior Watch Officer. And then a year at the Soviet Desk.

Q: Who was the Assistant Secretary in the European Bureau?

WISE: John Leddy was the Assistant Secretary. It was getting in early in the morning, going through gobs of cables, marking them up, and trying to get them to your bosses when they came into work a little bit later. During the course of the day, there were several batches that came in, so this process was repeated. Other parts of the job included getting clearances and making sure that everything that went out that need a Front Office clearance had that clearance from one of the Principals. So it was an active job. It got you positioned to know how the Bureau operates and to know how things operate at that level.

Q: Then you moved over to the Op Center. Were you there during any crisis times?

WISE: We had Vietnam rumbling in the background. Particularly if you had the night shift, you had calls from Vietnam coming in and things that you had to relate to whoever would be responsible at a particular level. That was a constant thing. There was a coup in Greece, in April 1967. There was some suspicion that some corridors of the United States were behind this and those sorts of accusations that flew back and forth. One of my subsequent bosses, Senator Pell, chairman of the Helsinki Commission, was quite friendly with the King. He, in particular, had an interest in knowing if there was any effort to assist Papadopoulos.

Q: Did you get any glimmers of that whole business?

WISE: Not really, I couldn't add much to the historical record.

Q: I served in Greece from 1970 to 1974 and the general feeling was, and I think most historians agree, that the coup actually came as a surprise. The coup was expected, but it was supposed to be by some Generals. This caught everybody off guard. You were in the Soviet Desk when?

WISE: 1968 to 1970. In those days, the Soviet Office was divided into three parts: Bilateral questions, economic matters and multilateral questions. I started out in the multilateral section, under a fellow named Vlad Toumanoff, who was the head of that Section. I

worked on Soviet-European policy. The job then was somewhat similar to what we had done in INR. We had a lot of reading papers, reading cable traffic and other sources and trying to give the State Department some sense of what Soviet policy in any particular area - mine was Europe - was likely to be. So there was a lot of preparation of position sort of papers. Then I moved over to the Bilateral Section and became head of the Bilateral Section. The head of Soviet Affairs in those days was a fellow name Spike Dubs. And Tom Buchanan was the Deputy. There, it was a much more action oriented operation. You were dealing with the Soviet Embassy directly and with bilateral problems, such as they were in those days. Not nuclear and military policy, but how you enforce certain regulation, such as our closed area regime to Soviet diplomats. In those days, the Soviet Union closed off a tremendous part of it's territory to the outside world, including the United States. In retaliation, the United States and other countries set certain areas that the Soviets couldn't come to. The Soviet diplomats were always trying to break this system. And they would get themselves invited by well-meaning Americans around the country (professors or business establishments) to come and speak in a closed area. And then, to travel in those days, they had to submit an itinerary to the State Department, and we'd see where they were going and see if the place was open or closed. A lot of these place were closed in our country arbitrarily. And so the Americans involved in giving the invitation could not understand why a Soviet diplomat couldn't come to Dubuque, Iowa, for example. So the pressure came back on us at the desk to do something, to make an exception. And we'd say that we would make an exception if they would make an exception for us in Moscow. We were trying to help our situation in Moscow, and those of us who had served there previously had a special interest in this whole operation. Another interesting experience involved Soviet planes flying from Moscow to Cuba, which was regular traffic in those days. The Soviet Union supplied a lot of things to Cuba that Cuba needed very badly. They had gotten into the habit, we were informed by the U.S. Air Force, of flying across the Atlantic and then stopping in Bermuda and being refueled at the U.S.-U.K. Airbase. They always pleaded that this was an emergency landing, but then it became a regular routine. What they were trying to do was to save on fuel and be able to carry more cargo. The Air

Force asked us if there was something we could do about this. So, we called the DCM in and he said that this was not something that we could see continue. Well, the Soviets gave us assurances that they would look into it, but it did continue. Obviously, they were seeing if we were bluffing or not. I was the Action Officer of putting together a plan that eventually stopped this practice. We got together with our Air Force people and when the next plane came in, we held it there for five days, doing an inspection. We did that a couple times and the whole practice stopped.

Q: What was the impression of the Soviet Embassy at that time? This was during the Nixon period and Kissinger was having consultations with the National Security Advisor and Bill [Greenan]. Were the relations well-developed at that time between Bill Greenan and Kissinger at that point?

WISE: As far as the rest of us could determine at the time, Kissinger kept things pretty much to himself. We would often hear about things afterwards. You remember the story of Kissinger and Jake Beam in Moscow: Kissinger would make trips to Moscow and not even tell the Ambassador that he was there and that sort of thing. I wasn't there at the time, but I imagine that that could be the case. There was quite a bit of activity from the White House - probably more there than from the State Department.

Q: Did you all feel cut out?

WISE: I think we felt cut out as an institution. Our relations with the Soviet Embassy were always quite formal and quite stiff and not terribly frequent. We didn't socialize with them. Had we tried, I don't know whether they would have been willing or not. It was a fairly stilted relationship in terms of action sort or things. You did business with them and that was all.

Q: You left there in 1970 and whither?

WISE: To Prague, to Czechoslovakia.

Q: Doing what?

WISE: I was head of a small Political/Economic Section. We had about four Officers (one Economic Officer, two Political Officers and myself) and that constituted our effort in those days to follow things in Czechoslovakia from the Political and Economic standpoint. At that point, we were still in the aftermath of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. There had been a tremendous crackdown in terms of contacts with foreigners. Except for a little contact with people in the cultural field that felt safe enough to talk to an American and, during the summer, a once a week softball game that we played with some Czech teams, we had virtually no contact with them. My boss, Mark Garrison, introduced me to just one unofficial contact, who was a Czech journalist who was still willing to talk to us. I saw this man about once a month. I was there about a year and three months; one morning, I read the newspaper and there was a big headline on the front page that this one contact that we had had been arrested and sentence to ten years in jail south of Prague for contacts with foreign diplomats, for giving state secrets. Our DCM went in to protest, and was told that I had 48 hours to leave the country. This was in November of 1971, so, in fact, I was PNGed. I left Prague in November.

Q: It sounds like it was such an enclosed place that you couldn't have been too unhappy to leave.

WISE: That's true. The atmosphere was very tight and very closed. Prague itself is a beautiful city. You had the sense that, if you could talk to Czechs more, they would be good people to know. So, there was some bitter sweetness to leaving. You always feel a little funny, too. They drove me out to the airport in the Ambassador's limousine with the flag flying, trying to make a little statement ourselves. And when we got to the airport, there were four Czech soldiers who marched with me all the way to the plane. So, it was a little bit of a lonely feeling. Once you got on a plane bound for the West, you felt a little liberated.

Q: How did the Department treat you, as far as Personnel and so forth? Did you have any problems when you came back?

WISE: No, I thought the Department's attitude was very supportive. They knew that these were all false charges. Information that I would get from this man was all stuff that was contained in press releases from the Foreign Ministry. When we would meet, he would always want to meet in places where, I always felt, he was sure there was a microphone so that he could take down the conversation to make sure that he wasn't saying anything he shouldn't. One time, we had a small garden where we first lived in Prague and my wife was going to have a little lunch outside. He said, “Oh, no, let's eat inside.” And that sort of tipped us off. I thought that he always wanted to be listened to, that he was part of the Secret Police. He may have been. After I left Prague, I went to London, while they were trying to cook up another assignment. I was approached by Alfred Friendly, who is the former editor of The Washington Post. He was a great friend of this Czech who had been thrown in jail and wanted to know all about it - had I really gotten anything from him? I told him that, no, there was no information to really pass at all. It was all part of the Czech campaign to increase the distance between foreigners and the Czech citizens.

Q: For some time, the Czechs were almost the most virulent anti-American population, weren't they? They were not a benign member of the Soviet Bloc.

WISE: They did engage in some of those activities. I don't know what the best clue to the Czech character is, but one that I've always found very insightful, is the Good Soldier [Shvek]: the story of a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, how you outwit your bosses by over compliance with their desires. You sort of do them in that way. There's something in the Czech character that way. They could be very subservient. When Communism fell, the Czechs were close to the last in this. There weren't big demonstrations out in the street. So there is something in their character. I think part of it is being in Central Europe, surrounded by all these bigger powers and thinking you have to keep your head down.

Q: You mentioned how you got out. What happened to your wife and family?

WISE: They were able to leave in a little less haste. They left at the end of the week. The action of persona non grata applied to me alone, but, clearly, they were to leave. We met in London, and by that time the Department had worked up a trade whereby I went to replace a fellow named Peter Bridges down in Rome. And Peter, who had wanted to come to Prague eventually, took my place. So, we didn't even go back to the United States.

Q: You were in Rome from when to when?

WISE: November 1971 to 1974.

Q: What were you doing in Rome?

WISE: I was in the Political Section. I was number two in the Political Section. I covered two things. One was matters dealing with the Foreign Ministry: multilateral and bilateral questions. And I also followed the Communist Party. I was asked to do that primarily because of my experience in the Soviet Union and Prague.

Q: What was your impression of the caliber of the Foreign Ministry?

WISE: It was mixed. There were some bright guys and there were some real deadheads as well. Overall, the better Officers have done quite well. One of them ended up being here as Ambassador. Some have not done very well at all.

Q: During this period, were there any problems in the area of foreign relations between the United States and Italy?

WISE: No, nothing prominent. The Italians were always very good allies whenever we wanted to do something in Europe. The main focus was on the domestic side and the very large Communist Party.

Q: Could you describe how, during this period, the Italian Communist Party, stood as far as allegiance and subservience?

WISE: I don't know in terms of degree of subservience - Italians are always lively and have independent thoughts. I don't know what the historians would say about the connection. The MAS Party had big numbers at the polls. For many years, the Christian Democrats ruled with other parties of the Left. There was a big debate about whether we should support the Center-Left position of the Christian Democrats. The big debate was: are we getting too close to the Left; will the Communists eventually be brought in? On the other side, people asked if this was a different kind of Communism, a Communism that you could talk to. An interesting side of this while I was there was to be one of the two people in the Embassy who was authorized to talk to Communist Party officials. The fellow I talked to was named Giuseppe Boffa, editor of the Italian Communist newspaper. We talked about general things. I reported on things, as I'm sure he did, too. Eventually, he said he'd like to go to the United States, so we put that request back to Washington. It was not granted at first, but he did eventually get there. I thought myself that this man knew the Soviet Union. This man was a Communist and had lived there as a correspondent. He knew what a terrible place it was just as well as I did. We used to exchange reminiscences of this. Yet, at the same time, he could be a Communist in Italy.

Q: Who was the Ambassador at the time?

WISE: Graham Martin when I first arrived and then John Volpe, former Governor of Massachusetts.

Q: Did you get any feeling of Ambassador Martin?

WISE: Yes, a very introspective, person's person, who liked to plot, manipulate and devise Machiavellian types of schemes to operate. He kept to himself.

Q: Did you find that you would talk to him about what you were doing on the political level or did it get filtered through the system?

WISE: It just filtered up through the system.

Q: How was John Volpe?

WISE: He was a much more outgoing person. In a social sense, we would see him more. He would invite people over to the Residence. I felt that he was not particularly sympathetic to the idea of how you dealt with the Left. He was more conservative on that, in that you don't deal with the Communists at all.

Q: Was there any debate within the Political Section over how we treated the Communist Party?

WISE: Yes, there was quite a bit of difference of opinion on this. The debate in Washington along the lines of getting to know the Communists or to completely isolate them was reflected in the Embassy as well.

Q: Do you find that your Soviet experience gave you a true feel for true Communists versus other types of Communists?

WISE: I certainly have strong feelings for how life is in the center of things, in Moscow and the way the whole system ran. These things don't allow for cultural and other differences that make up a place. Italy was an entirely different place than Moscow. At the time, it was said that the way to fight the Communist Party in Italy was to send all the members to Moscow to live for a while, and they'll see very quickly.

Q: Berlinguer, the head of the Communist Party, was sort of the personification of the old line Party. How did we evaluate him?

WISE: Those who favored establishing contacts with the Communists would cite Berlinguer's approach to things, which was, I think, much more sophisticated than some of the old, hard line Communists. Berlinguer was seen as part of the discussion on this. If there's a man like this, who seems more reasonable and not so ideological on things, maybe we ought to look at this.

Q: What was your impression of the Christian Democrats? What was your impression of the type of government they had?

WISE: You always have the impression that this is the same mix of politicians that took turns being Prime Minister or Minister of Foreign Affairs. On the surface, it looked like things were changing all the time. New Italian governments were coming in. But, in a larger sense, there was a tremendous continuity because it was the same people, the same coalitions that were in power for a long time. This sort of rotation seemed to stave off any great gains by the Communists or the Right extremists, the Neo-Fascists. You also had the impression that these people were all feathering their nests. We were all suspicious off their connections with the Mafia. You had a feeling that the country, as far as not falling to Communism, had a certain resistance. Operating internally, it had difficulties.

Q: I came to Italy in 1979 and I'd never served there before. I used to be amused at our Political Section in Rome. They'd get all excited about whatever election there was, and there would be minute changes in the percentage of who got what, but it was always the same Christian Democrat coalition majority. Nothing changed particularly. Did you have a feeling for the regionalism of Italy?

WISE: Yes, you had a definite sense of that. The north and the south were like two different countries. And there was a tremendous amount of antipathy between the north and the south. The north was fairly prosperous and felt that the south was a drain on the resources of the country, to which they contributed a great deal. You sometimes wondered

how the place held together. I could have been mistaken as coming from another part of Italy, rather than being an American. It was that sort of big differences that were really hard for an American to appreciate.

Q: You left there in 1974. And relations during the period from 1971-1974 were pretty stable. Did Vietnam raise its head at all while you were there? Did you find Italians questioning what we were doing there?

WISE: It was a major interest that never bubbled out of control. The Italians that I knew were generally friendly to the United States, but they just could not understand how we could continue to prosecute this war in Vietnam. They were generally anxious that we end it and get out. I think that press and television coverage had a real impact; the Italians have an open heart for a lot of these questions and I think it was a very unpopular thing.

Q: You left there in 1974.

WISE: Then I came back to the United States and went to the National War College for a year.

Q: That might have been a rather interesting time, because that's when Vietnam went down the tubes. How did that hit the particular military?

WISE: The military seemed to be very torn about the thing. On the one hand, it didn't like to see the U.S. coming to what seemed to be a defeat. On the other hand, I think a lot of them felt that we should have been out a long time ago, or should have never been in. They were all Colonels and had distinguished themselves in the Service. They were taking this War College course, which was supposed to lead them into higher positions and more responsibility and broaden their horizons.

Q: So, in about 1975, you went to where?

WISE: In 1975, I went to an assignment in the Department, to a Bureau that no longer exists, called the Bureau of Cultural Affairs. Within that Bureau, I was assigned to an Office which dealt with East-West exchange questions. We gave grants to different organizations.

Q: These East-West exchanges were the major program we had for the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union.

WISE: Yes, and we started small. The Easterners, the Soviets and their satellites at that time, were very skeptical about these programs and, of course, they always tried to skew the composition in their favor. They would send people to come to the United States to learn about science, technology and engineering and we would send people to study literature and what was called at the time “soft subjects.” There was a great imbalance that way. One of the big battles we had was to bring it more into line with what the agreement said: that they should be balanced on both sides. It was very important to take serious stands on questions because, once you begin to let the Soviets push you around, you were in trouble.

Q: Would you have had the same problem trying to tell American universities that, no, they couldn't have Soviets or Czechs studying mechanical engineering at their colleges?

WISE: That didn't seem to be a problem. The American recipient schools were concerned that they weren't getting people in the arts and sciences. The Soviets would say that they had scoured the whole Soviet Union and they couldn't find anybody who wanted to come over here and study English literature. We eventually got them to send a few people, but it was always seen by them as a cow they could milk and get their people trained in the hard sciences.

Library of Congress

Q: It must have been difficult to find Americans who wanted to go and study the hard sciences in the Soviet Union. If you wanted to take a hard science, the United States was pretty much the place to come to, wasn't it?

WISE: Absolutely. There was also the language question. The people that wanted to study in the Soviet Union were generally in the Belle Arts and had learned Russian. But very few people who were becoming engineers in the United States had studied Russian. So, that was out of kilter, too. But overall, these programs really produced some exchanges that, in the long run, served us very well as well. We had a program with Yugoslavia in those days. We had a board in Washington that decided on the content of our program with Yugoslavia and we had the same problem with them. One of our board members was James Billington, who is now head of the Library of Congress. He wanted to know why we weren't getting people in Literature and the other subjects. We told him about the problem, and said that we should really do something about it. So, we took it upon ourselves to really crack down. The Embassy went along, but then the Yugoslavs began to complain loudly and it came back to a higher political level in the United States, which asked what we were doing to our relations with Yugoslavia. And then everybody got cold feet.

Q: What happened after you left this exchange?

WISE: I went on loan to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which is where I've been ever since. It's an independent government organization, primarily allied with the Congress. We have our offices on Congressional premises and our Chairman and Co-Chairman are always a Senator or a Representative. Most of the members of the Commission are Congressmen. There are three Executive Branch Commissioners as well, which makes the Commission unusual in the American sense: one from the State Department, one from the Defense Department and one from the Commerce Department. The organization is primarily concerned with the question of human rights violations in Eastern Europe from 1976, when it started, until the fall of Communism.

Q: When you first went over there, you were on loan?

WISE: Yes, at the time, I think there were four Foreign Service Officers on loan.

Q: You went over when?

WISE: In the fall of '77.

Q: What was the situation with CSCE when you went over there? Where did we see this organization?

WISE: Let me give you a little bit of background. The organization was founded by a Congresswoman who had gone to the Soviet Union in 1975, shortly after the countries of Europe, the U.S. and Canada had signed the Helsinki Final Act in August of 1975, by which the thirty-five countries agreed to operate their countries on the basis of certain principals, including stipulations about how they would treat their citizens. The Congresswoman that went over found that Soviet citizens, who had seen what their country had agreed to, said that their country was not doing any of these things, that they didn't have any of these rights. So, she complained to the State Department and didn't get a good response. So, she started a movement within the Congress to start a commission, which became our Commission, devoted to trying to help on the human rights side. Initially, there was a battle between the Commission and the Department, because the Department felt that the Commission was an intrusion on foreign policy. When the law establishing the Commission came up to President Ford, there was an expectation that he might veto it. But it came at about election time and the Commission had developed a constituency, and he decided not to veto it. So, the Commission came into existence.

Q: When you arrived there, it was a well-established Commission?

WISE: Yes, it had been going for about a year and a half. And they had made a trip to Eastern Europe, which certainly hadn't been assisted very much by the State Department

in arranging appointments or even seeing officials. There were accusations that foreign officials were discouraged from seeing us.

Q: Who was the Congresswoman, by the way?

WISE: Fenwick. She and Senator Case were the ones that co-sponsored the bill. I think we had at that time five or six from the House and five or six from the Senate, plus the three Executive Branch. Then, the administration change, and we not long had President Ford in. We had President Carter in and the Democrats were much more sympathetic.

Q: Kissinger kind of wanted to undercut it, because it wasn't his baby and because he was more interested in strategic arms limitations. This human rights business was sort of messy and he didn't want to deal with that.

WISE: From everything I know about the subject, that is true. He considered not only that human rights were less important, but that it interfered with more important geo-strategic goals. He never really had a good word for the human rights side at all. I think, when the Commission came up, not only saw it as an intrusion, but it dealt with a subject that he didn't hold high.

Q: The election of '76, did that give a shot in the arm to the Commission?

WISE: It certainly improved things, because the Chairman and the Co-Chairman were Democrats. Immediately, the White House became a lot more friendly, as did the State Department. Eventually, an agreement was worked out whereby the Commission would actually participate in the international meetings of the CSCE, the first of which was in Belgrade from the fall of 1977 to the spring of 1978. The head of the delegation was Arthur Goldberg, who was named by President Carter. Goldberg had a Foreign Service Deputy and a good contingent of Officers from the State Department. I joined the Commission in the fall of '77, so I had very brief exposure to Belgrade. But it seemed clear that Goldberg leaned strongly in the direction of the Commission's Officers and away from the State

Department. He took an unheard of position at an international diplomatic meeting, which was that he came out and was very critical of the countries where we felt that human rights violations took place (in the Soviet Union, primarily). And he actually named names of individuals. At the time, NATO and the Department were very uncomfortable with this. But the position of the Commission was to come out and be very strong and direct in these questions, so it established something. Over time, it's become the way of doing business in the CSCE. In the Department, everybody's perfectly comfortable with it.

Q: How do you get your information?

WISE: Through all sorts of sources. Through immigrant organizations here, the open press, Embassy reporting. Another thing that the Commission got was access to classified cables. We were able to develop quite accurate information. There was also a guy in Munich who has very good information on cases of individuals. So, the focus was not in a vague, “Stop hurting your people” way, but rather, “Why are you doing this to this particular person?” At that time, the main categories of human rights abuses were political prisoners, people who were persecuted on religious grounds, and then people who were not allowed to travel. They were the main areas that we concentrated on. Family reunification: people could not leave their country in Eastern Europe to join a relative in another part of, say, Western Europe.

Q: What was the lever that you could use on Eastern Europe, outside of having a conference where you talk about these things?

WISE: Surprisingly, the prospect of having continuous conferences and the idea of being publicly criticized in front of the world at large... For a while, the Soviet line in particular was that we were indulging in interference in their internal affairs and that this was unacceptable. But we just kept it up. We said that this is not just interference in internal affairs. These are subjects that, by the Helsinki Act, we've all agreed are subjects of legitimate concern to all countries. So, what you do to your citizens internally is of

legitimate concern to other countries. Eventually, the Soviets became so frustrated that they began to criticize things in the United States: particular people that they claimed were political prisoners. So, we said that we were glad to see that they agreed that this was a matter for everyone to be concerned with. At the same time, the Soviets were preaching to the world that they were the most democratic, wonderful society in the history of the world, which is an outright, complete lie. It was a question of accountability. We didn't all sign something and then forget about it.

Q: What was your job on this and did it change over the years?

WISE: It changed over the years, both in terms of the organization itself and in terms of the jobs that I would have on participation on the various delegations. In the Commission itself, I started out as a Staff Assistant, and then became the Deputy Staff Director. This was after I had retired from the Foreign Service. Then I became Staff Director in 1987 and had that position until the beginning of this year.

Q: Sam, how did the famous year of 1989 play out? Here is where the whole of Eastern Europe got belligerent and the Soviet Union began to fall apart. Did this do anything for the Commission?

WISE: Yes, we felt ourselves very much in the middle of what was happening. The Commission and the United States played a significant role in bringing about the downfall of Communism. The CSCE could at least qualify as a catalyst for the changes that occurred. There were a number of developments that got the people mobilized and realize that they could actually make some changes in their own countries. For instance, we had a meeting in Sofia on the environment - seemingly, a safe subject. But a number of independent environmentalists in Bulgaria wanted to hold a meeting of their own outside the conference hall. Their comments extended past the environment to statements about political freedom, that sort of thing. The authorities tried to shut this down, and they did at one point. And all the delegates made a tremendous protest in the meeting and,

eventually, the Bulgarian authorities backed down. The whole situation behind the scenes was so incendiary at the time that the whole government fell, and the leader for many years was ousted. So, there, we could feel that there was a direct impact of the meetings themselves. And there were earlier signs. For instance, the Soviets had completely refused to do anything except take this criticism from the West. But then we had a meeting on human contacts (reuniting families) in Switzerland. Surprisingly, at the end of that meeting, they actually began to let a few people leave that country. That was the first sign of breaking the ice. There were a number of these things that occurred along the way. We eventually had a meeting in Copenhagen in 1989, in which countries were falling all over each other to sign onto Western values. We got almost a complete agreement by the East, not only to human rights standards, but to our free enterprise economy. Things had changed so much by that time.

Q: It must have been a very invigorating and satisfying period of your work.

WISE: They were heady days, yes.

Q: Shall we stop at this point, Sam?

WISE: Fine.

Q: I want to thank you very much.

End of interview